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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000376

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2019

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SUBJECT: BAHAI COMMUNITY REPORTS IMPROVEMENTS, STILL SEEK
RECOGNITION

REF: ISTANBUL 374

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary. On September 23, leadership of the Baha'i community in Turkey shared with us their close collaboration with the government, the reduction in the number of assaults and harassment, and the community's remaining request to be recognized, at least informally, as a religion by the GOT. The best approach to recognition, the Baha'i leadership believes, would be for them to urge statements and acknowledgement from a Turkish political leader given such statements' potential impact on public perception. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Director of the Baha'i Community of Turkey's office of external affairs Cuneyt Can reported to poloff that the only case of harassment against a member of the Baha'I community over the past year was an August 2008 incident. Because of comments made by the harasser, Can believed he was a member of Jandarma Istihbarat ve Terorle Mucadele (JITEM - Jandarma intelligence) or Milliyet Istihbarat Merkezi (MIT - national intelligence) and not simply a disgruntled Turkish citizen. Beyond this instance of harassment, the leadership reported no problem in meeting, or in publishing or distributing their publications. In part, Can explained, the Baha'i are free from the problems of worship reported by other religions because Bahai'ism does not have congregational worship. The Baha'i have ten offices in Turkey and the GOT "does not make it a big issue, preferring instead to focus on the Alevis."

¶3. (SBU) Characterizing the community's relationship with the GOT as overall "good with closer collaboration than ever before," Director Cuneyt Can qualified his comment by noting this situation was in spite of the AKP government and not because it was more tolerant. While Can appreciated the extensive communication with representatives from the Diyanet (Mustafa Sait Yazicioglu), state ministers, members of parliament, and the human rights board of the Foreign Ministry, he lamented that it was all talk and no results. Specifically, he said the community would like to see results in the realm of official - or even informal - recognition of the existence of the Baha'i as a religious minority in Turkey. "Even the Alevis have been approached in the 'democratic opening' conversations, but we have not." The Baha'i leadership expressed concern that they would be left out of the positive whirl of the "democratic opening" due to this lack of public acknowledgement at events like the Prime Minister's Buyukada luncheon or President Obama's meeting with the religious leadership meeting in Istanbul in April ¶2009. If the Turkish leadership were to publically acknowledge the existence of the community, Can argued, the

public would do the same with time. The Baha'i leadership concluded that the best solution for the community would be for the leadership to encourage such statements from the Turkish political leadership.

¶4. (SBU) Members of the Baha'i community are not permitted to identify themselves as such on their Turkish identity cards. While the dedicated spot for religion on the identity cards can be left blank, the options for religions are limited to a codified list of 15 other religions and Christian denominations. Despite repeated entreaties to ministers and the Ministry of Interior's population and citizenship bureau, according to Can and General Secretary Farzad Kuchani, the Baha'i are still unable to self-identify.

¶5. (C) Comment: The Turkish Government has long been criticized for its continued practice of including religion on national identity cards. According to the EU, the Turkish state will have to abandon the practice in its accession bid. The fact that the state has codified a list of religions is a manifestation of the Turkish state's assertive secularism. While the Baha'i request recognition and the right to self-identify, it may be a battle to be slowly won through informal communication with GOT and state officials and leadership rather than in the courts and through international pressure. We believe that the Baha'i leadership is probably correct in their assessment that the best approach to recognition may well be for them to urge statements and acknowledgement from Turkish political leadership given its potential impact on public perception. End comment.

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